

# ROBERT LOWELL'S LIFE-WRITING AND MEMORY

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

in

The Department of English

by

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August 2003

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## Abstract

This thesis examines Robert Lowell's use of memory in such autobiographical works as *Life Studies* and *Day by Day*. In those volumes, Lowell returns to recollect his private past; his act of remembering becomes the poetic process by which Lowell is able to create the retrospective truth of his life. The most important feature of memory in his life-writing is in its role as an imaginative reconstruction. In the first chapter, I review recent models that regard memory as a reconstructive process. Memory involves more than fact, according to these investigations; it also represents a fictionalizing process of self. In *91 Revere Street*, Lowell recollects the incidents from his childhood that seem to be essential to the formation of his self. For Lowell, memory is a way of knowing by which his self learns to recognize itself in the world. In *Life Studies*, he also explores his lost self in memories and situates it within American culture generally, transposing his own case to the national level. Lowell seems to discard the essentialist idea of self and instead adopts an idea of the self recreated by remembering. Lowell's self is culturally constituted and dominated. Finally, memory seems to serve Lowell in knowing not only himself but also others better. In *Day by Day*, Lowell achieves new images of his parents that represent a revised and reshaped attitude to those formative figures. He comes to understand his parents as humans in light of his evolving recollection. For Lowell, memory is a creative force of the poet's artistic imagination continuously reconstituting the past in the present.

## Introduction

Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959) made a significant breakthrough to a new style in American poetry that M.L. Rosenthal labeled "confessional": it stressed a more personal and autobiographical content. The term "confessional" characterizes the way confessional poets represent their private humiliations, sufferings, and psychological problems. In the confessional mode, the autobiographical self and memory were placed more and more at the center of the poem. The use of the autobiographical self and memory was a reaction against the Eliotic aesthetic that poetry is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality. Many confessional poets since the 1950s came to embrace the autobiographical self and memory as their major themes. Among them, Lowell is the most successful poet, not only leading the new way in autobiography but also representing the new sensibility in American poetry. Just as Augustine's and Rousseau's autobiographies reveal the ideas of any given age regarding memory and the self, Lowell's autobiographical works also reflect recent theories of autobiography. Lowell's autobiographical works will be examined as a life study of American culture in which the poet's self is situated.

In *Life Studies*, Lowell consistently tries to go back and recollect his private past. In the process of remembering, he discloses the painful memories out of his deepest mind. At first, he began experimenting with prose memoirs based on childhood memories. Ian Hamilton has described Lowell's surviving manuscripts

of autobiography as “mostly a series of false starts, the same page retyped, slightly revised and then seemingly abandoned” (*Robert Lowell: A Biography* 226). Much of Lowell’s autobiography is “in the form of character sketches and anecdotes from childhood” (*Robert Lowell: Biography* 227). It seems to me that Lowell was aware of the filtering process of memory while writing about his life and was deeply interested in the mental process involved in remembering a past life.

Recent theories of memory present it as an imaginative reconstruction. Memory involves more than fact; it represents a fictionalizing process of self. With a premise of creative process rather than transcription of facts, this thesis examines the operation of memory in Lowell’s life-writing. Chapter one focuses on Lowell’s autobiographical memoir *91 Revere Street*, which illustrates the poetic process of memory as an imaginative reconstruction. In this piece, Lowell remembers the concrete objects that surrounded him in his childhood. He identifies himself and his family as well as neighborhood and schools by name. Especially he seems to center on the relationship between husband and wife, parents and child. He recalls a series of objects to imply a family’s situation. For Lowell, memory is a way of knowing with which his self learns to recognize itself in the world. Memory is subjected to the interpretation of emotions the young Lowell feels in his surroundings.

Chapter two analyzes the poems of *Life Studies* where Lowell locates the causes of his alienated self by situating himself in the cultural context. His act of remembering leads to an understanding of his present self. It seems to be much

like the psychotherapy through which he tried to liberate himself from his past. The poetic structure of *Life Studies*, which consists of four parts, suggests Lowell's careful strategy in remembering his private and American cultural past. Part one presents the cultural memories of disintegration which will be the backdrop for the subsequent parts: the exiles, madmen, and prisoners such as the personae of "The Banker's Daughter" and "A Mad Negro Soldier" will frequently reappear in the pages of the whole volume. "Inauguration Day: January 1953" also segues into the poet's private feeling. Part two consists of autobiographical prose that focuses on Lowell's childhood experience. This part became the basis for free verse and concrete detail in the poems of part four. Lowell remembers his childhood experiences through prose autobiography and turns to poems based on those memories.

Chapter three deals with *Day by Day* where Lowell again returns to his early memories. This volume also illustrates Lowell's concept of memory as a reconstruction of the past. Memory is no longer an endurable and fixed point of return. It is reconstructed by being recalled in the present and emerges with a new meaning every time it is remembered. His memories help him to know his own self and others better. Although he does not resolve his disturbed feelings toward his parents, Lowell may move toward forgiveness and reconciliation. As "Epilogue" suggests, Lowell is afraid that his poetry of memory may lack artistic grace. However, we see the brilliant combination of imagination and memory in his poetry.

## Chapter One

### Memory as an Imaginative Reconstruction: *91 Revere Street*

*Life Studies* is useful in examining the operation of memory for it represents Lowell's present perception and attitude toward his disturbing past memories. Answering questions by Frederick Seidel, Lowell suggests that the process of writing is akin to the reconstruction of memory. Lowell points out the fictional elements of his poems as follows:

There's a good deal of tinkering with fact. You leave out a lot, and emphasize this and not that. Your actual experience is a complete flux. I've invented facts and changed things, and the whole balance of the poem was something invented. So there's a lot of artistry, I hope, in the poems. Yet there's this thing: if a poem is autobiographical---and this is true of any kind of autobiographical writing and of historical writing---you want the reader to say, this is true. (71)

Lowell's remark poses the problem of representation through which the original materials are transformed into art. He seems to adopt the recent concept of the autobiographical act as the fiction-making process. Recent autobiographers believe that the materials of the past are shaped by memory to serve the needs of present consciousness.

Traditionally, autobiographical writings have been considered to be based on the verifiable facts of a life history. Rousseau's remark in the opening lines of *The Confessions* (1781) shows what autobiographical writings must be based on to

represent the truth of the author's life: "I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent, and which, once complete, will have no imitator. My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself" (17). Recent autobiographers, however, no longer admit Rousseau's concept of autobiographical truth as an unmediated reconstruction of a verifiable past. Fictions are involved in the autobiographical act, and the self is necessarily a fictive structure in a process of self-creation.

Human memory also has been regarded as a repository from which specific materials can be retrieved in the process of remembering as described by St. Augustine:

And I come to the fields and spacious palaces of memory, where lie the treasure of innumerable images of all kinds of things that have been brought in by the senses. There too are our thoughts stored up, ... and there too is everything else that has been brought in and deposited and has not yet been swallowed up and buried in forgetfulness. When I am in this treasure house, I ask for whatever I like to be brought out to me, and then some things are produced at once, some things take longer and have, as it were, to be fetched from a more remote part of the store. (10.8)

Augustine continues to elaborate on his definition of memory when he meditates on time in Book 11:

It is now, however, perfectly clear that neither the future nor the past are in existence, and that it is incorrect to say that there are three times---past, present, and future. Though one might perhaps say: 'There are three times---a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things future. (11.20)



For Augustine, the present time of things past is memory; the present time of things present is sight; the present time of things future is expectation. His concept of memory as “a present of things past” serves to explain the quality of autobiographical narrative. He illustrates his ideas of memory through an example of the recitation of a psalm. When we recite, the mind performs three functions of expectation, attention, and memory. The future, which the mind expects, passes through the present into the past. As we proceed with our recitation, so the expectation grows shorter and the memory grows longer. He notes that this is true also of the whole of a man’s life. Here Augustine imagines memory as a repository in which everything can be preserved, altered, and enriched by the process of remembering.

When Lowell recalls the portrait of Mordecai Myers in *91 Revere Street*, his notion of memory seems to be reminiscent of Augustine’s concept in that he emphasizes the “rocklike” permanence of memory which survives “all the distortions of fantasy, all the blank befogging of forgetfulness.”

Major Mordecai Myers’ portrait has been mislaid past finding, but out of my memories I often come on it in the setting of our Revere Street house, a setting now fixed in the mind, where it survives all the distortions of fantasy, all the blank befogging of forgetfulness. There, the vast number of remembered *things* remains rocklike. Each is in its place, each has its function, its history, its drama. There, all is preserved by that motherly care that one either ignored or resented in his youth. The things and their owners come back urgent with life and meaning---because finished, they are endurable and perfect.  
(12-13)

Allan Johnston explains the “rocklike” permanence of memory in *Life Studies* as the process of mythologizing Lowell’s familial and personal experience. “This mythologizing,” he says, “requires an objectification of experience through setting off from the events that constitute self, thereby making them ‘rocklike,’ ‘urgent with life and meaning,’ and ‘endurable and perfect’ (74). He adds that this process cancels out the “flux of experience.” In fact, Allan Johnston points out Lowell’s different uses of memory between *Life Studies* and his subsequent works. Johnston describes *Life Studies* as “presenting ‘solid’ or ‘fixed’ representations of the past” (73). “By the time of the poems in *Day by Day*,” by contrast, “the past changes more than the present” (73). Alluding to Lowell’s remark in “91 Revere Street,” Steven Gould Axelrod like Johnston characterizes Lowell’s memories as “‘fixed in the mind’ and ‘rocklike,’ neither random nor refreshing” (106). According to Axelrod, however, “these memories are not merely facts of a childhood now long past, they are present realities, that part of the past that weighs on the present, having lost none of its emotional significance” (106). As Axelrod shows, Lowell rearranges “invented facts” in order to give the poem the impression of being true.

As I have stated, recent models of memory tend to controvert the Augustinian concept of permanent memory. Daniel L. Schacter elaborates on the notion that “our memories are always constructed (93)” and he argues that we construct our autobiographies from fragments of experience which change over time. Memory is never, as Augustine thought, a repository in which everything is

stored as a whole. The rememberer's mind does not record all sense data experienced. What is recorded are rather bits and fragments of experience which are encoded in engrams. Schacter rejects the idea that memories are stored in distinct places in the brain. Wilder Penfield, on the other hand, felt that he had located permanent memories when he probed the surface of the exposed temporal lobes of patients and again and again elicited the same memories of events from their past. Many psychologists point to Penfield's experiments as evidence that "all experiences are permanently stored in the mind" (Schacter 77). But Schacter notes that these experiments are not good evidence for this belief. Although he could elicit memories, Penfield could not say whether his patients' experiences were memories of actual past incidents or mere fantasies or hallucinations. What he elicited is difficult to distinguish from fabricated reconstruction. According to Loftus, the patients' reports "may not involve memories of actual past events at all" (413). Loftus notes, "such reports may result from reconstruction of fragments of past experience or from constructions created at the time of report" (413).

F.C. Bartlett also argues against the theory of "memory traces" stored mechanically in the brain and reproduced at will. He asserts that memory is "an imaginative reconstruction, or construction, built out of the relation of our attitude towards a whole active mass of organized past reactions or experience" (213). Bartlett writes of a *schema* which is "an active organization of past experiences." Various schemata are interconnected into one active, organized setting. According

to Bartlett, the rememberer recreates anew the event he is trying to revive. He may recall what ought to have been rather than what really was. When they were asked to reproduce the original material, subjects in Bartlett's experiments appeared to reconstruct their material rather than actually to remember it. According to Bartlett, the subject's organizational scheme relies heavily on the integration of present experience with that of the past. Therefore, the subject often remembers what he expected to perceive rather than what he actually perceived. Most important to Bartlett's concept of memory is that the construction of the past experiences justifies the subject's attitude. Attitude is a matter of feeling or affect which includes doubt, hesitation, surprise, astonishment, confidence, dislike, repulsion and so on. Bartlett notes, "the recall is then a construction, made largely on the basis of this attitude, and its general effect is that of a justification of the attitude" (207).

Twentieth-century autobiographers also consider the reconstructive process of memory an essential factor in organizing the truth of their life. Memory is no longer a repository in which the past is stored intact and recalled in future. They seldom claim that autobiography offers a faithful reproduction of their verifiable past. Instead they acknowledge that raw materials of the past are reshaped by their present attitudes. Autobiography should be understood as an art of an imaginative reconstruction; memory and imagination come to be related closely in the making of autobiography. In *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, Mary McCarthy admits the

presence of fiction in her memories. She regards fiction as an ineluctable feature of the truth of her life. Memory as an imaginative reconstruction seems to McCarthy to be essential to the creation of her self in her memoirs.

As the title indicates, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* is motivated by her memory, but her memory, she says, may be unreliable because of the absence of her parents since she was six. In the preface "To the Reader," she notes that the loss of her parents is the central event in her history and the incentive to recover her past in narrative. The writing of her life through remembering is for McCarthy a problematic task, but this desperate situation provides her with the opportunity to reconstruct the fragments of her past. Memory as an imaginative reconstruction is central to McCarthy's project, and it serves to organize the critical part of her autobiographical truth. It also contributes to the discovery of her personal identity by justifying her attitude to the past events. Her remembering of past experiences confirms the recent opinions of memory that Bartlett and Schacter assert: memory is reconstructed by the rememberer's present needs; memory involves the rememberer's present awareness of memory.

In his prose memoir *91 Revere Street*, Lowell depends heavily on the concept of memory as an imaginative reconstruction. Though he recollects his childhood experiences from a child's point of view, Lowell adds his adult perspective to his original memories. Ian Hamilton has suggested that Lowell's double vision of childhood and adult perspective is "a method that is particularly hard on Mr.

Lowell" (*Robert Lowell: A Biography* 227). Lowell's comments on himself are also hard when he describes his childhood attitude towards his father: "I was a churlish, disloyal, romantic boy, and quite without hero worship for my father, whose actuality seemed so inferior to the photographs in uniform he once mailed to us from the Golden Gate" (13). More important, however, are the memories of the incidents and things which influence Lowell's present self. He recollects his past to comment on the present self and culture. Lowell focuses on his family relations by remembering the incidents and things which seem to be crucial to the formation of his self..

*91 Revere Street* examines Lowell's self which originates in the cultural decline of his family. All incidents and things in this prose memoir suggest cultural decline just as the furniture the Lowells inherit from the Myers lost its original ease and grandeur. Lowell's description of the furniture is clearly intended to depict the family's situation:

Here, table, highboy, chairs, and screen---mahogany, cherry, teak---looked nervous and disproportioned. They seemed to wince, touch elbows, shift from foot to foot. High above the highboy, our gold National Eagle stooped forward, plastered and doddering. The Sheffield silver-plate urns, more precious than solid sterling, peeled; the bodies of the heraldic mermaids on the Mason-Myers crest blushed a metallic copper tan. In the harsh New England light, the bronze sphinxes supporting our sideboard looked as though manufactured in Grand Rapids. All too clearly no one had worried about synchronizing the grandfather clock's minutes, days, and months with its mellow old Dutch seascape-painted discs for showing the phases of the moon. (43-44)

The inherited furniture looks uncomfortable and disharmonious. The precious belongings have lost their luster: the plastery gold of the Eagle, the peeling silver plate, and the metallic tan of the mermaids. The grandfather's clock has not been synchronized to show the present time. This is a clear disconnect between the furniture's past state and its present state which parallels the fortunes of the family.

Lowell tries to give a sense of his parents in the incidents and objects he recalls. Lowell's description of the property dispute, for example, presents his mother's materialistic personality:

Cousin Cassie only became a close relation in 1922. In that year she died. After some unpleasantness between Mother and a co-heiress, Helen Bailey, the estate was divided. Mother used to return frozen and thrilled from her property disputes .... Shortly after our move to Boston in 1924, a score of unwanted Myers portraits was delivered to our new house on Revere Street. These were later followed by "their dowry"---four moving vans groaning with heavy Edwardian furniture. (13)

To present her precarious personality, Lowell introduces her taste for beauty: "She kept a middle-of-the-road position, and much admired Italian pottery with its fresh peasant colors and puritanical, clean-cut lines" (34). The Italian pottery with "puritanical clean-cut lines" tells of her taste for beauty, a taste that caused her to hate everything about the navy: "Mother hated the Navy, hated naval society, naval pay, and the trip-hammer rote of settling and unsettling a house every other year when Father was transferred to a new station or ship" (18).

Lowell's description of his father's den illustrates the listless personality of Commander Lowell:

The walls of Father's minute Revere Street den-parlor were bare and white. His bookshelves were bare and white. The den's one adornment was a ten-tube home-assembled battery radio set, whose loudspeaker had the shape and color of a Mexican sombrero. The radio's specialty was getting programs from Australia and New Zealand in the early hours of the morning.

My father's favorite piece of den furniture was his oak and "rhinoceros hide" armchair. It was ostentatiously a masculine, or rather a bachelor's, chair. It had a notched, adjustable back; it was black, cracked, hacked, scratched, splintered, gouged, initialed, gunpowder-charred and tumbler-ringed. It looked like pale tobacco leaves laid on dark tobacco leaves. I doubt if Father, a considerate man, was responsible for any of the marring. The chair dated from his plebe days at the Naval Academy, and had been bought from a shady, shadowy, roaring character, midshipman "Beauty" Burford. Father loved each disfigured inch. (17)

Father's den is filled with trifling objects which imply his listless life. Lowell emphasizes his father's lack of interest in beauty by his repeated use of "bare and white" for the walls and bookshelves. His pathetic radio set is the only adornment of the den. He loves the "rhinoceros hide" armchair because it is "ostentatiously a masculine, or rather a bachelor's, chair." It was purchased from "a shady, shadowy, roaring character, midshipman 'Beauty' Burford" but has nothing to do with any heroic career. Lowell's portrayal also implies his father's career marked by repeated failures.

Lowell emphasizes the materialistic interest represented by the objects in the home. Commander Lowell is engrossed in attending to his car. Mrs. Lowell makes



up her mind to buy “the squalid, impractical Revere Street house” (18) to distinguish her from the fellows of navy life. It is “flaunting private fortunes in the face of naval tradition” (23). The narrator does not make an exception of himself in picturing the family’s interest in things. When he was in the third grade, his object for love was toy soldiers: “For a few month at the flood tide of this infatuation, people were ciphers” (13). He even cheats his school mate Roger Crosby to get a collection of European soldiers. This incident attests to his relentless comment on himself: “I was a churlish, disloyal, romantic boy, and quite without hero worship for my father, whose actuality seemed so inferior to the photographs in uniform he once mailed to us from the Golden Gate” (13).

Lowell focuses on the incidents that influenced his young self. They reveal how the young Lowell shares his parents’ distorted cultural values. His parents’ preoccupation with social rank anticipates his similar preoccupation at school. When he worries about his father’s leaving the Navy, he is afraid it will have a negative effect on his social standing: “I was in the third grade and for the first time becoming a little more popular at school. I was afraid Father’s leaving the Navy would destroy my standing” (13). His longing for his good standing in school resembles his parents’ desire for their good status in society. Despite his rebellion against his parents, he shares their values. While his treatment of his parents is harsh, the narrator does not figure out how closely his own behavior resembles his parents’. Most of the young Lowell’s acts are to get the attention of

little girls. He mentions his “restless dreams of being admired” (20) and suggests his desire for popularity: “I had attracted some of the most popular Brimmer School boys. For the first time I had gotten favorable attention from several little girls” (22). In a while, however, he pretends to be unaware of his real motives, saying “I don’t know why I couldn’t stop” (22). This episode is a good example of Lowell’s juxtaposition of childhood and adult perspectives.

In the earlier part of this prose memoir, Lowell has established the permanence of memory: “There, the vast number of remembered *things* remain rocklike” (13). Moreover, Lowell adds that the “things and their owners come back urgent with life and meaning---because finished, they are endurable and perfect” (13). As the memoir progresses, however, Lowell undermines the idea of a perfect memory because the changes of time have colored the moments of his remembering. Lowell’s *Life Studies* should not be seen as factually true but as a fictional reconstruction of self. In *91 Revere Street*, Lowell traces the origin of his young self to understand his present self. He seeks his self-reflection by situating himself in the context of family, society, and culture. His memories of family are vividly revived and exposed through the prose autobiography.

Lowell’s choice of prose seems to be significant in relation to his self-examination. In his essay “On ‘Skunk Hour,’” Lowell recognizes the effect of a prose account in carrying the immediacy of past memories: “I felt that the best style for poetry was none of the many poetic styles in English, but something like

the prose of Chekhov or Flaubert" ("On 'Skunk Hour'" 227). In his interview with Frederick Seidel, Lowell expresses his finding of poetic possibility in the prose: "Prose is less cut off from life than poetry is ... I couldn't get my experience into tight metrical forms" (68). Lowell's choice of prose results from his desire to explore his self through vivid remembrance of events from the past.

## Chapter Two

### Life Changed to Landscape: *Life Studies*

As we have seen in the introduction, the poems in *Life Studies* were revolutionary in their frankly autobiographical content and prosaic style. In that volume Lowell turned away from the tightly structured and symbolic poetry of his early work and toward a new mode which would be more in touch with his direct experience. This change was related to the personal experience he underwent at that time. During the 1950s, Lowell was in an artistic and psychological crisis. He recollected his private experience and projected it upon contemporary American culture. Especially, he extended his mental breakdown to American life of his age: He created the myth of “an America (and a contemporary civilization generally) whose history and present predicament are embodied in those of his own family and epitomized in his own psychological experience” (Rosenthal 61). Lowell sought his self lost within time by recalling memories embedded in his childhood, and transposed them to a national level. The 1950s was the age of the Cold War and conformity represented by the names of Senator McCarthy and President Eisenhower. In such a time the integrity of the individual self was under deep threat from governmental agencies and ominous social institutions. Lowell’s reaction to this situation was to explore the deepest reaches and the most extreme experiences of private being and, concomitantly, to read in his own personal

experience the lesson of the age generally, so that his mental breakdown became the mental breakdown of contemporary American civilization.

Lowell himself commented of the years prior to *Life Studies*: “Life Studies was a windfall. It was after six or seven years ineptitude---a slack of eternity. I remember a cousin proving to someone that I was finished---at only thirty-nine! Five messy poems in five years” (*Robert Lowell: Interviews and Memoirs* 156). At the same time, he tried to work on an autobiographical memoir, but he regarded it as something of a failure. Lowell has described this memoir as follows: “The prose was an awful job to do. It took a long time and I think it could be less concentrated with more sting or something like that” (*Robert Lowell: Interviews and Memoirs* 80). He finally published the first version of *91 Revere Street* in the *Partisan Review* in 1956.

It was during the 1950s that Lowell first suffered from manic attacks which lasted throughout the rest of his life. In August, 1952, he was taken to an Army hospital in Munich because of a manic attack. “A Mad Negro Soldier Confined at Munich” was derived from this experience. The manic attack in April of 1954 was more severe than the previous one. After that, Lowell was diagnosed as a schizophrenic. *Life Studies* emerged from Lowell’s psychiatric treatment. In a letter to Elizabeth Bishop of an earlier date, Lowell said that “psycho-therapy is rather amazing-something like stirring the bottom of an aquarium-chunks of the past coming up at unfamiliar angles, distinct and then indistinct.” Lowell began writing

the autobiographical memoir that was to become "91 Revere Street" in 1954 and later he experimented with transforming his prose lines into poetry in *Life Studies*.

In *Life Studies*, Lowell traced his self to its origin by remembering and disclosing his private past, including his family's humiliation and his own mental breakdown. He peered into his personal past and connected his own vulnerability with a cultural condition. Rosenthal has commented on the nature of confessional poetry as follows: "Lowell's 'Skunk Hour' and Sylvia Plath's 'Lady Lazarus' were true examples [of confessional verse] because they put the speaker himself at the center of the poem in such a way as to make his psychological vulnerability and shame an embodiment of his civilization" (79). Lowell's vulnerable self becomes the symbol of his age. Instead of seeking the eternal beyond this world, he sought for the nature of human life in this world. He explored his personal self lost in time by remembering his personal past. Lowell descended to his own unconscious and relived his painful childhood to recover his lost self.

*Life Studies* is the process out of which Lowell's life is recalled and his self is reconstructed. This is much like a process of free association which brings content from the unconscious into consciousness. There exist two selves in *Life Studies*: that of the remembered past and that of the remembering present. Their relation is the same as that of the patient and the analyst in a psychoanalytic process. While the remembered past self recounts fragments of his past memories, the present self plays the role of the analyst watching the process of remembering. Katherine

Wallingford mentions the split ego of the poet in Lowell's poetry: the observing ego and the experiencing self. This split has a dual function: "it permits the rational 'observing ego' to observe the experiencing self, and to shape the materials of the experience into art" (127). Terri Witek also regards Lacan's idea of the split subject as a useful frame to elucidate Lowell's problematic position: "the human subject is not an entity with an identity, but a being created in the fissure of a radical split" (16). Witek attributes the sense of loss in *Life Studies* to a side effect of language. As in Lacanian and other recent models of the constitution of the subject, Lowell's recreated self is culturally dominated and constituted for he is reconstituted within language.

Lacan's essay "The Mirror Stage" presents the fundamental characteristics of human subject. Lacan argues that the child recognizes itself as a unified whole through its own image in the mirror. As a reflected image, the first self-identification is basically distorted in so far as the position, the size and the distance of the image are transformed. This projection of illusion based on the mirror experience is the basis of the *meconnaissance* or *miscognition* characterizing the ego. The mirror stage comes to an end when the child links itself to "socially elaborated situations" (5). When the child enters into language, the child's desire must be mediated by language whose laws govern human desire. Human subject is caught in the web of the signifying chains of language rather than being autonomous. The creation of self in Lowell's life-writing refers to the

idea that the self is not given but reconstructed in the course of remembering. Truth and fiction are necessarily involved in an attempt to narrate the materials of a life history. In the Lacanian perspective, the autobiographical act can be understood as a mode of self-creation in which the fictions become an ineluctable fact of a life history.

The four poems in Part I of *Life Studies* establish a cultural context within which the poet undertakes the self-examination of the following sections. This part elaborates the fragmented cultural situation in which the self is dominated. The opening poem "Beyond the Alps" functions as a guide for the poet's life studies. Lowell's journey from Rome to Paris implies that he will seek the self in the world:

Life changed to landscape. Much against my will  
I left the City of God where it belongs.  
There the skirt-mad Mussolini unfurled  
the eagle of Caesar. He was one of us  
only, pure prose. I envy the conspicuous  
waste of our grandparents on their grand tours---  
long-haired Victorian sages accepted the universe,  
while breezing on their trust funds through the world. (7-14)

Lowell is riding on a train from Rome, "the City of God," to Paris, "the earthly city": though much against his will, he leaves the City of God where it belongs. Lowell's journey evokes his inner experience. On the one hand, this refers



to Lowell's abandonment of Catholicism. His destination is the secular city which he once termed the land of unlikeness. Mussolini inherits Caesar's violent culture in the City of God: "There the skirt-mad Mussolini unfurled / the eagle of Caesar" (9-10). In the last of the quoted lines, Lowell envies the nineteenth century secular understanding of the world. In the subsequent lines, Lowell mocks the Pope with images of an electric razor and a chirping pet canary on the Pope's left hand. On the other hand, Lowell's journey represents determination to seek his self in the fragmented world. As Steven Gould Axelrod points out, "artistic ascension, like religious ascension, has come to seem impossible for him" (104). Lowell descends to earth from "that altitude once held by Hellas" (4). Charles Altieri characterizes this journey as a move from the mythic world of religion and imagination to the empirical world of fact and prose (182). Lowell's metaphorical journey is to find the suffering self in the world: "the blear-eyed ego kicking in my berth / lay still" (31).

Throughout *Life Studies*, Lowell accepts the life of a prosaic and fragmented world as the only reality and transforms it into the psychological landscape of memory. The poems of *Life Studies* present the remembered people and objects which make up a number of scenes and impressions. Axelrod states, "this concern with memory and time is reinforced by Freudian psychology, which teaches that self-examination can yield insight, which in turn can yield self-transformation" (115). In *Life Studies*, personal and cultural breakdown are closely related. The

volume gives a portrait of American culture in a time of crisis through recollecting the private painful memories of the self. "Inauguration Day: January 1953" consists of cultural memories which reflect the fragmented socio-political reality of the 1950s. This poem suggests that much of the private memories cannot be separated from cultural memories. The socio-political climate of the 1950s influences the perspective of the present self. The era is depicted as the frozen state:

Ice, ice. Our wheels no longer move.

Look, the fixed stars, all just alike

as lack-land atoms, split apart,

and the Republic summons Ike,

the mausoleum in her heart. (10-14)

This part looks like a vignette of the age: "fixed" and "just alike" carry the poet's present feeling of the socio-political condition. The tight structure of the poem reflects the poet's inner desperation. As in "Inauguration Day: January 1953," the last poem of the first part, "A Mad Negro Soldier Confined at Munich," focuses on American culture within which the individual self is structured and confined: a black soldier's mental condition implies the fragmented culture. Moreover, the cultural memories in the first part of *Life Studies* are reminiscent of Lowell's present predicament in its fourth part.

Maurice Halbwachs shows that collective memory is “a socially constructed notion” (22). According to him, “collective frameworks are the instruments used by the collective memory to reconstruct an image of the past which is in accord, in each epoch, with the predominant thoughts of the society” (40). He stresses that “the conceptions of the past are affected by the mental images we employ to solve present problems, so that collective memory is a reconstruction of the past in the light of the present” (34). Halbwach’s idea that collective memory is reconstructed seems to illustrate how autobiographical memories may be selected and rearranged in autobiographical poems. In *Metaphors of Self*, James Olney also regards autobiography as an act of fictional creation. The autobiographical writer does not transcribe his or her original experience: “Man creates, in fact, by the very act of seeking, that order that he would have” (4). Fictionalizing is the process of rearranging the original experience in which every memory engages. However, this does not weaken the truthfulness or authenticity which the poet seeks to maintain. Lowell believes that “real poetry came, not from fierce confessions, but from something almost meaningless but imagined” (“On ‘Skunk Hour’” 228).

In “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow,” Lowell uses the double-consciousness of the young child and the adult self. On the one hand, the original events and backgrounds are seen through a young self, and on the other hand the adult self comments on them. The poem opens with the child’s shouting: “I won’t go with you. I want to stay with Grandpa!” (1). The following voice is that

of the adult who explains it from the present perspective: "That's how I threw cold water / on my Mother and Father's / watery martini pipe dreams at Sunday dinner" (2-4). This kind of dialogue invites the reader to the reconstructive process of remembering. Rather than recollecting the fixed memories, Lowell shows the process of both remembering and analyzing his original experience. In the first part of the second stanza, the young self carries his sense of past memories "looking through / screens as black-grained as drifting coal" (14-15):

One afternoon in 1922,  
I sat on the stone porch, looking through  
screens as black-grained as drifting coal.  
*Tockytack tockytack*  
clumped our Alpine, Edwardian cuckoo clock,  
slung with strangled, wooden game.  
Our farmer was cementing a root-house under the hill.  
One of my hands was cool on a pile  
of black earth, the other warm  
on a pile of lime. (13-22)

The poem evokes a sense of the exact date and place just like a snapshot. Lowell connects the past and present consciousness with the double consciousness of the child and the adult: "*Tockytack, tockytack* / clumped our Alpine, Edwardian cuckoo clock." A childlike onomatopoeic word "*Tockytack, tockytack*" is mixed with the

adult consciousness recognizing the clock as Alpine and Edwardian. The last three lines reveal the young Lowell's elemental grappling with the truth of life or the fact of death. Both images of earth and lime suggest life and death. His hands sense the coolness of a pile of black earth and the warmness of a pile of lime. Throughout the poem, these two images recur to hint at the death to come.

The snapshots of his grandfather are introduced to represent his grandfather's house and his career:

All about me  
were the works of my Grandfather's hands:  
snapshots of his *Liberty Bell* silver mine;  
his high school at *Stukkert am Neckar*;  
[.....]  
Like my Grandfather, the décor  
was manly, comfortable,  
overbearing, disproportioned. (22-25, 34-36)

These vivid pictures record the important moments of grandfather's life through metonymic associations: his high school days and mountain climbing. The legs of the Rocky Mountain chaise have lost their original varnish; "Huckleberry Finn" has grown "pastel-pale." The last lines of the second stanza, however, carry the present self's perception of grandfather's life: "Like my Grandfather, the décor / was manly, comfortable, / overbearing, disproportioned."

Lowell's use of double consciousness unveils the early memories that might have been embedded in his unconscious. This mechanism provides the reader with the opportunity to gain a new insight on his life. The reader gains cumulative insight into the memories of the characters in the poem. This is a poem about the young Lowell's first facing of death. Throughout, Lowell carefully prepares for his younger self's cognition of death in the last section. The closing lines of the first section introduce Lowell's memory of the dead Scottie puppy with the images of black earth and lime that suggest death throughout the poem. The second section presents an illusion of perfection in terms of the young Lowell's reflection of himself in the mirror. He sees himself as an Olympian figure. But he realizes that his face in the mirror is just a distorted image: "Distorting drops of water / pinpricked my face in the basin's mirror" (59-60). In the third section, Aunt Sarah's life compares with the "naked Greek statues" at Symphony Hall, deathlike in the off-season summer.

In the last section, Lowell's double consciousness shows the difficulty he has in reconstructing his family life. This section begins with the boy's daydream but soon returns to the adult world. From the boy's perspective, Lowell first presents the images such as "a sail-colored horse" with which his uncle's death is associated. The poem's perspective, however, changes into the adult's as he remembers the duck shooters:

Double-barrelled shotguns  
stuck out like bundles of baby crow-bars.  
A single sculler in a camouflaged kayak  
was quacking to the decoys.... (101-04)

“Uncle Devereux was closing camp for the winter” (107) foreshadows his uncle’s death. In the following lines, Lowell presents the personality of his uncle through the series of student’s posters: the posters of Mr. Punch, *La Belle France*, the pre-war music hall belles and a poster of two or three young men in khaki kilts. All of these posters suggest the grotesque quality of the young uncle’s life. “Mr. Punch” is described as a watermelon in hockey tights; young men in khaki kilts are bushwhacked.

The final verse paragraph carries the boy’s shocked awareness of death.

I cowered in terror.  
I wasn’t a child at all---  
unseen and all-seeing, I was Agrippina  
in the Golden House of Nero.... (129-32)

The child’s awareness of death is introduced by a comparison of himself to Agrippina under threat of death by her son Nero. Most shocking is that his uncle’s death takes place in the prime of his life. This is the moment when the adult’s perspective merges with the child’s perception. The last section ends with the image of earth and lime which has run throughout the poem:

He was dying of the incurable Hodgkin's disease....

My hands were warm, then cool, on the piles

of earth and lime,

a black pile and a white pile....

Come winter,

Uncle Devereux would blend to the one color. (147-52)

"My hands were warm, then cool, on the piles / of earth and lime" carries the immediacy of memory recollected from childhood. "Come winter, / Uncle Devereux would blend to the one color" comes from the adult's later understanding of the event. The poem deftly presents both the immediacy of childlike perceptions and an adult's understanding of the event.

The second poem "Dunbarton" follows a similar technique. Recalling a visit to the family graveyard, the poem pursues the memory of his relationship with his grandfather. The poem presents some moments that evoke the closeness of their relationship: the drive to Dunbarton with the grandfather, their ritualistic service for the ancestors, and lighting a bonfire. Lowell also remembers stabbing with his grandfather's cane for newts. Finally, the poem ends with his memory of cuddling in his grandfather's bed. Although the child's perception predominates throughout the poem, the adult's consciousness intrudes into the lines. The closing lines are interesting examples in which childhood and adult consciousnesses are combined:



I saw my self as a young newt,  
neurasthenic, scarlet  
and wild in the wild coffee-colored water.  
In the mornings I cuddled like a paramour  
in my Grandfather's bed,  
while he scouted about the chattering greenwood stove. (55-60)

The comparison to a young newt offers a picture of helplessness, the young boy like a young newt, hardly distinguishable from its pond.

"Grandparents" captures memories of his young years when he spent time with his grandparents, but, unlike "Dunbarton," it focuses on present pain. Although his grandparents now belong to the other world, Lowell recollects their memories: "Grandpa still waves his stick" and Grandmother still wears her veil. Memories of his grandparents are vividly carried in the present tense. Now he has inherited the farm where he spent his childhood years. In the second verse paragraph, the billiard table arouses his sense of loss. Listening to "O Summer Time!" on the old gramophone, Lowell notes that his grandfather's "favorite ball, the number three, / still hides the coffee stain" (26-27). The concluding lines catch his present grief and judgment on his grandfather:

Never again  
to walk there, chalk our cues,  
insist on shooting for us both.

Grandpa! Have me, hold me, cherish me!

Tears smut my fingers. There

half my life-lease later,

I hold an *Illustrated London News*---

disloyal still,

I doodle handlebar

mustaches on the last Russian Czar. (28-37)

Lowell comes to deep grief when he realizes his grandfather is dead, never to return again. His grandparents and their world have passed away. The reference to the marriage ceremony suggests the sense of stability he found in his relationship with his grandparents. The image of his doodling suggests how much the world to which his grandparents belonged has changed. The poems on his grandparents present various aspects of Lowell's family in decline.

Part Four of the volume comprises a series of deaths in Lowell's family: the deaths of Lowell's uncle, grandparents and parents. Shaping the memories and observations of his personal past, Lowell reconstructs his relationship with grandparents and parents. He selects incidents and objects to make an agonizing reappraisal of his seedtime. In "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow," Lowell introduces the parents and grandparents who are depicted in the poems to come. Though its title indicates an elegy on his uncle, the poem really sets the stage for Lowell's childhood life. As in the poems about his uncle and

grandparents, Lowell here represents his direct, remembered experience and its accompanying emotions. He explained what he intended in these poems in his interview with Stanley Kunitz:

I wanted to see how much of my personal story and memories I could get into poetry. To a large extent, it was a technical problem, as most problems in poetry are. But it was also something of a cause: to extend the poem to include, without compromise, what I felt and knew. (85)

He reconstructs his artistic truth out of the flux of direct experience. Even if not always factually true, it offers him the means of self-examination.

Lowell's exploration of his personal past continues through the deaths of his parents. "Commander Lowell" is a portrait of Lowell's father captured through his childhood memories. Compared to his absolute affection for his grandfather, Lowell's attitude toward his father is thoroughly ambivalent. Although he reiterates the portrait of Commander Lowell in "91 Revere Street," the bitter emotion toward his father is somewhat softened. But the poem also includes some anecdotal memories in which Lowell is frank about his father's failure. At the scene of a golf game, his father "took four shots with his putter to sink his putt" (26). His father is singing "Anchors aweigh" in the bathtub when he leaves the Navy. Through a number of jobs, his father moved finally to an investment company where he was "himself his only client" and finally "squandered sixty thousand dollars" (61). The last stanza mentions his father's success but by that point it has been thoroughly compromised by his failures. To convey his complex

emotion, Lowell brilliantly manipulates details and objects that evoke his memories of his father.

In "Sailing Home from Rapallo," an adult's perspective is more noticeable in the description of his mother's death. At the beginning of the poem, Lowell expresses his grief for his mother: "Your nurse could only speak Italian, / but after twenty minutes I could imagine your final week, / and tears ran down my cheeks...." (1-3). His description of his father's tomb illustrates Lowell's negative attitude to his maternal relatives. His father is the "only 'unhistoric' soul" in the burial plot, and he is unfit to lie alongside his wife's kin as his Latin motto seems "too businesslike and pushing here" (30). Lowell's final description of his mother's body is ironical in light of her previous life:

In the grandiloquent lettering on Mother's coffin,

*Lowell* had been misspelled *LOVEL*.

The corpse

was wrapped like *panetone* in Italian tinfoil. (35-38)

In light of her lifelong taste for beauty and luxury, the misspelling of her name and the wrapping of her corpse in Italian tinfoil yield a sense of pathos.

As Rosenthal remarks of confessional verse, Lowell's poetry deals with "the private life of the poet himself, especially under stress of psychological crisis" (15). Lowell employs his personal experience in such a way as to make it the embodiment of American culture. "Memories of West Street and Lepke" is a

brilliant handling of his private memories and of American cultural memory. The poem discusses Lowell's imprisonment as a conscientious objector in the forties. The two lines that begin the second stanza summarize Lowell's idea of memory: "These are the tranquilized *Fifties*, / and I am forty. Ought I to regret my seedtime?" (12-13). Lowell reflects on the significance of the tranquilized fifties and how his past contributed to his present self. The poem initiates the retrospection through a description of the tranquilized age:

Only teaching on Tuesdays, book-worming  
in pajamas fresh from the washer each morning  
I hog a whole house on Boston's  
"hardly passionate Marlborough Street" (1-4)

As "hardly passionate" suggests, the speaker shares the enervation that characterizes the tranquilized age. The speaker's private situation is depicted as part of the American cultural milieu. The first two lines present the speaker's comfortable life; he has a sufficient time to read and loll in pajamas since he teaches only one day a week. His young daughter makes him feel old enough to be her grandfather. The poem works through the sharp contrast between the past and present. Vivian Smith has commented, "The poem is a beautifully intricate and subtle arrangement, built around a series of highly modulated, delicately handled contrasts between the author's own past and present and between two decades in American society" (72).

The function of memory in this poem is to draw a parallel between the past and the present. The speaker reflects on his past in an attempt to cope with his present situation in light of the past in which he was rebellious. Beginning in the present, the speaker is looking back on his past days when he was in prison as a conscientious objector: "These are the tranquilized *Fifties*, / and I am forty. Ought I to regret my seedtime? / I was a fire-breathing Catholic C.O." (12-13). On the one hand, "the tranquilized *Fifties*" refers to the cultural climate of the age. On the other hand, it also carries Lowell's present situation after his rebellious past. As a conscientious objector, he made a "manic statement, / telling off the state and president" (15-16). He spent a year in prison with "a Negro boy with curlicues / of marijuana in his hair," "Abramowitz, / a jaundice-yellow ('it's really tan') / and fly-weight pacifist," and "Bioff and Brown, / the Hollywood pimps." In the last stanza, the speaker remembers Lepke who is awaiting his death by electrocution. What is noticeable about Lepke is his lack of memory. Lobotomized, he cannot recall his past:

Flabby, bald, lobotomized,  
he drifted in a sheepish calm,  
where no agonizing reappraisal  
jarred his concentration on the electric chair---  
hanging like an oasis in his air  
of lost connections.... (48-53)

Lepke is unable to reappraise his past "in a sheepish calm" (49). He sees only the future of "the electric chair--- / hanging like an oasis in his air / of lost connections...." (51-53). Unlike Lepke, Lowell has both the capacity and the necessity to reappraise his past and, in light of that reappraisal, to understand his present anew.

In "Waking in the Blue," Lowell shows the process of memory by which the speaker comes to realize that he is one of the inmates of the age. The poem is based on his experience of mental breakdown and subsequent life in a mental hospital. The speaker describes his inner states of mind through the outer scenes. "Azure day" seems to reflect his anxiety, making his "agonized blue window bleaker." The landscape itself becomes petrified; "Crows maunder on the petrified fairway." Inmates are presented just as the "figures of ossified young." They have the fixed obsession for their lost past. Stanley, "once a Harvard all-American fullback," still carries the build of a boy in his twenties. He lives only in his glorious past as "a kingly granite profile in a crimson golf-cap, / worn all day, all night." Another inmate is Bobbie who was once a member of an elite Harvard club: "Porcellian '29, / a replica of Louis XVI / without the wig---." As Stanley looks like a seal, so Bobbie too recalls a sea animal: "redolent and roly-poly as a sperm whale." Again like Stanley, he turns his attention to his past: "he swashbuckles about in his birthday suit / and horses at chairs." Physically, these two figures still keep their strength, but mentally they are fixed in their twenties. According to Alan

Williamson, their madness is “partly the result of an intense early narcissism, tied to achievements ... whose value does not carry very far beyond the confines of Harvard Yard, or of adolescence” (75). These two Harvard men fail to make contact with present reality as they linger on in their past. Time has not moved onward since their school days.

In the course of meditation, he finally comes to identify himself with others:

After a hearty New England breakfast,  
I weigh two hundred pounds  
this morning. Cock of the walk,  
I strut in my turtle-necked French sailor’s jersey  
before the metal shaving mirrors,  
and see the shaky future grow familiar  
in the pinched, indigenous faces  
of these thoroughbred mental cases,  
twice my age and half my weight.  
We are all old-timers,  
Each of us holds a locked razor. (82)

The speaker looks at himself imprisoned with others in the Boston culture. His hearty New England breakfast and proud walk in his turtle-necked French sailor’s jersey are associated with the Boston culture he has examined in *Life Studies*. He comes to know that he is also one of the mental cases. He finds his future is shaky



because he is defined in terms of his past. He observes himself mirrored in his inmates.

For Lowell, remembering is the process of recognizing his own self and others in the culture. Lowell explores himself within American culture by recollecting his painful memories. "Skunk Hour" epitomizes American culture and the suffering self in it. The overall state of life in this poem is close to the contemporary American society that Lowell has represented throughout *Life Studies*. The breakdown of the outer world is associated with Lowell's inner breakdown: "The season's ill" shifts to "My mind's not right." He sees the hell in his mind: "I myself am hell; / nobody's here---". Commenting on this poem, Lowell calls the night "An existentialist night" (*Collected Prose* 226). In the last part of the poem, however, the skunk family gives the poet a sense of life he has sought throughout *Life Studies*. In remembering his past, he discards the essentialist idea of self just as Jerome Bruner argues that "introspection is at best 'early retrospection' and subject to the same kind of selectivity and construction as any other kind of memory" (99). What Lowell presents as an alternative is the idea of a self recreated by remembering. *Life Studies* cannot be read as a simple transcription of past memories but as a fictionalizing process of self. Lowell's autobiographical act provides him with the opportunity to comment on and to refigure his life and American culture.

## Chapter Three

### The Past Changes More Than the Present: *Day by Day*

Lowell's *Day by Day* returns to direct expression of autobiographical experience and memory. *Day by Day* resembles *Life Studies* in that it has distinct sections each of which includes introductory poems ("Ulysses and Circe"), poems concerning other writers such as Robert Penn Warren and John Berryman, and poems concerning Lowell's relationship with his family. *Day by Day* further resembles *Life Studies* in showing the imaginative process that transforms his personal experiences into art. This imaginative process of memory helps him to know himself and others better.

In "Epilogue," Lowell addresses the issue of the intention of his art. At first, he expresses dissatisfaction of that art.

Those Blessèd structures, plot and rhyme---

why are they no help to me now

I want to make

something imagined, not recalled?

I hear the noise of my own voice:

*The painter's vision is not a lens,*

*It trembles to caress the light.*

But sometimes everything I write  
with the threadbare art of my eye  
seems a snapshot,  
lurid, rapid, garish, grouped,  
heightened from life,  
yet paralyzed by fact.

All's misalliance. (1-14)

In these lines, Lowell acknowledges that he has failed to caress the light. His criticism of himself reminds me of that of several of his critics. When *Day by Day* was published, it was harshly criticized for being too personal. In other words, the poetry of *Day by Day* was too close to real lives. In the above lines, Lowell says that his threadbare art seems a mere snapshot and “paralyzed by fact.” Here, we can raise the question whether memory is factual or is something imagined. Or is it half-fiction, half truth? The above lines figure the photographer’s lens as the recollection of fact; by contrast the painter’s vision is related to the “imagined” which illuminates the subjects. Lowell’s art of memory is neither wholly fabricated nor merely a recollection of fact.

While valuing Vermeer’s art of illumination, Lowell tries to defend to say what actually happened. Beyond this, however, Lowell prays for the grace of accuracy. “Accuracy” is to grasp truth which is more than fact.

Yet why not say what happened?  
Pray for the grace of accuracy  
Vermeer gave to the sun's illumination  
stealing like the tide across a map  
to his girl solid with yearning.  
We are poor passing facts,  
warned by that to give  
each figure in the photograph  
his living name. (15-23)

Lowell takes Vermeer's painting as an analogue for the artistic vision. As Vermeer gave a grace to the sun's illumination, memories of real life are illuminated by graceful accuracy. Lowell hopes to express the figures in his poems as Vermeer's girl is painted realistically rather than ideally. As the phrase "solid with yearning" illustrates, Lowell's art transforms memories of a daily life into art with artistic imagination. Although imagination and memory here appear as an opposition--- "imagined, not recalled," the two activities of imagination and memory seem to be complementary rather than contradictory in Lowell's poetry.

Lowell illustrates memory's imperfection in "Grass Fires": "In the realistic memory / the memorable must be forgone; / it never matters, / except in front of our eyes." (1-4). Lowell here distinguishes the "memorable" from the realistic

memory. The memorable is the ability to recast the past in such a way as to lend significance to the fact of what happened. Despite his remark about the memorable, the poem modulates realistic memory into the memorable. Just before the end of the poem, realistic memory seems to dominate the poem. Lowell sets some grass on fire to smoke out a rabbit and burns his grandfather's favorite tree. His grandfather chides him, saying "You damned little fool." At the end, Lowell's realistic memory changes to the memorable: he slaps the fire to death and snuffs out the inextinguishable root.

In "Jean Stafford, a Letter," Lowell also admits the limitation of memory: "My memory economizes so prodigally / I know I have suffered theft." (9-10). The poem begins with Lowell's nostalgic memory of how his first wife, Stafford, pronounced Thomas Mann. In the second stanza, he recalls her in her Heidelberg braids and Bavarian peasant aprons. But Lowell seems to warn against fabricating Stafford through these nostalgic memories. He avoids the possibility of caricaturing Stafford by introducing other memories of her artistic gifts, and he acknowledges his limitations in appreciating her:

You have spoken so many words and well,  
being a woman and you ... someone must still hear  
whatever I have forgotten  
or never heard, being a man. (23-26)

As Vereen Bell rightly suggests, the poem “clearheadedly and self-defeatingly points out an inherent limitation in nostalgia: that it can become a means by which one ignores necessary truths about other human beings” (207-8). He overcomes the danger of a falsifying memory by acknowledging that Stafford’s art has its own value apart from his memory of it.

In *Day by Day*, Lowell confesses frankly the secrets that he feels constrain his heart. Lowell hopes to resolve his lifelong conflicts and free himself from the emotional bondage of past experiences. The title *Day by Day* makes the reader expect to see how the past leads into the present and, likewise, the present into the future. One might anticipate finally the old Lowell remembering and arranging his past experiences and coming to recognize the meaning of the life and make a move toward reconciliation. “The past,” Lowell says, “changes more than the present” (“To Frank Parker” 33). This does not mean that the past experience itself changes but that the meaning of the past changes again and again with relation to other experiences, and the changed meaning clarifies the present. Lowell’s remark on the changeability of the past suggests that he departs from his past determination to define and understand his self by fixing his past experience.

The direct motive for Lowell to trace the wake of his past experiences is his contemptuous situation toward the mental illness he undergoes: “I am a thorazined fixture / in the immovable square-cushioned chairs” (“Home” 12-13).

The way to free himself from the mental illness rooted in his past is to reconstruct the past memory. The reconstruction of the past is part of an attempt to understand his self and revive his human spirit. In the situation of mental illness in which the dignity of the mind is damaged, Lowell feels perplexed about the loss of his identity: "between the devil and myself, / not knowing which is which or worse" ("Home" 53-54). His mental breakdown not only causes a confusion of identity but also tempts him to end his suffering: "*I wish I could die*" (57). But he escapes from the instant the death instinct is about to dominate. Although he has a strong premonition that there are only some months before his death, he dares not write the exact date to his grave. Despite his painful experience, he still holds a positive attitude toward life.

When he returns to the traumatic past that injured and tormented his innermost mind, his attitude departs from that of *Life Studies*. According to Alan Johnston, by the time of *Day by Day* Lowell comes to deny the fixity of memory. Alan Johnston relates Lowell's altered perspective on the nature of memory to a resolution of the oedipal structures (73). The resolution of the oedipal structures is directly related to the establishment of his identity as an independent individual. It also helps to free him from a life dominated by thoughts of death. That is because the oedipal project is a revolt against death generally and against the biological principle separating mother and child, and remembering is likewise a revolt

against death, a bid for immortality (Johnston 76). Therefore, his efforts to deny the fixity of memory and reconstruct the meaning of his life would allow him to escape the distorted relationship with his parents and restore his life, fixed to his past, to the present.

His efforts to reorder the past are embodied in the altered images of his parents that carry his new attitude. He discards his detached manner of presentation and the caricature of his father achieved through associating him only with lifeless objects in *Life Studies*. In "Robert T.S. Lowell," Lowell tries to understand the father by allowing him to speak for himself which is a radical new departure. The imagined dialogue subverts earlier presentations which hardly describe his father as a human. In this revised image, as Alan Holder points out, the father acquires "an eloquence, dignity, and scope he had never approached in the earlier book" (164). In the first stanza, Lowell acknowledges how little he knew his father. Through the images of crust and masks, he suggests his hope of moving beyond these masks to know his father's true self: "It would take two lifetimes / to pick the crust / and uncover the face / under our two menacing, / iconoclastic masks" (4-8). The dialogue allows his father to clarify his life and character in his own words. Of course, his father explains that he did not fit into the world after he was born. He frankly confesses his failure of his marriage, characterizing it as "loneliness to loneliness!" (31) He admits the flaws and failings in his life and



attempts to explain something of their causes. In the final lines, he rebukes Lowell for his attitude toward his own children:

You think that having  
your two children on the same floor this fall,  
one questioning, one climbing and breaking,  
is like living on a drum  
or a warship---it can't be that,  
it's your life, and dated like mine. (32-37)

His father emphasizes the difference between their lives. He hopes to untangle their sad relationship and preserve the integrity of both their lives. True love, he says, can be achieved through acknowledging differences with understanding and tolerance. In this poem, we see the imaginative process of creating his father's dialogue out of a merging of fact and fiction. It is not merely a recording of what happened but a creation he invents from his own experience.

A similar process of memory, which leads to knowing himself and another better, occurs in the poems of the mother. In "To Mother," the poet's stay in Boston triggers memories of his mother. Lowell's early view of his mother was ambivalent; while he admired his mother, he resented her for manipulating his father. Although he does not seem to resolve his conflict with his mother, "To Mother" results from his efforts to understand her better. In the beginning of the poem, he finds that he shares certain characteristics with her:

Your exaggerating humor,  
the opposite of deadpan,  
the opposite of funny to a sun,  
is mine now---  
your bolting blood, your lifewanting face,  
the unwilling ruffle of drama in your voice. (5-10)

We can see Lowell's mother who, with her "exaggerating humor," tries to conceal her mental anxiety but without success, and Lowell goes on to find a similar quality in his own character. Having become a father, Lowell is in a position to see that they share the problem of parenthood: "Becoming ourselves, / we lose our nerve for children" (22-23). In the final lines, he acknowledges their commonality and shared frailty: "It has taken me the times since you died / to discover you are as human as I am ... / if I am" (36-38).

His recognition of others leads to a new understanding of his own identity. In "Unwanted," Lowell confesses to the psychic wound concealed in the innermost mind, the result of a belief that he was "unwanted," denied and deserted from the moment of pregnancy. According to Lowell, the psychiatrist Merrill Moore told the poet that he had been unwanted as a child by his mother: "When I was in college, he said, "You know / you were an unwanted child?" (38-39). It is a cause of lifelong distress and conflict as well as an existential shame that he desires to veil.

Lowell wanted *Day by Day* to be understood as “a heartbreaking verse autobiography” (Helen Vendler 165). It records such heartbreaking memories as his unhappy marriage, the feeling of having been an unwanted child, mental depression, and fear of death. As Vendler says, these must be “the worst memories suppressed from *Life Studies*” (165). “Unwanted” exposes his turbulent feelings toward his mother, and by facing such memories honestly he hopes to avoid the danger of blind blaming his mother and then too easily resolving the tense relationship.

In the opening stanza of “Unwanted,” the situation of the poet “alone on *Antabuse*” recalls Ulysses’ plight in “Ulysses and Circe,” “like a sailor dying of thirst on the Atlantic” (4). The poet and Ulysses have thirsts for love and home in common. Conscious of this dilemma, the poet considers the value of recalling past experience:

Yet in this tempting leisure,  
good thoughts drive out bad;  
causes for my misadventure, considered  
for forty years too obvious to name,  
come jumbling out  
to give my simple autobiography a plot. (7-12)

Lowell is here thinking about the essential nature of the autobiographical act. The poem centers on the poet's discovery that he was an unwanted child and his interpretation of the fact. The "jumble" implies the haphazardness of these causes. The search for the causes involves the act of creating the plot of his autobiography. The past contains only raw material or random events without a unifying vision. In the autobiographical act, memory takes narrative form. Sidonie Smith defines memory in the autobiographical act as follows:

Memory is ultimately a story about, and thus a discourse on, original experience, so that recovering the past is not a hypostasizing of fixed grounds and absolute origins but, rather, an interpretation of earlier experience that can never be divorced from the filterings of subsequent experience or articulated outside the structures of language and storytelling. As a result, autobiography becomes both the process and the product of assigning meaning to a series of experiences, after they have taken place, by means of emphasis, juxtaposition, commentary, omission. (45)

This shaping of the past through memory is central to the autobiographical act; it is nothing less than an interpretation of life that invests the past and the 'self' with a coherence and meaning that could not have been evident before the act of writing itself (46).

Yet, the poem "Unwanted" does not definitely resolve his conflict with his mother. As many passages reveal, his complex feelings about his mother remain unsettled. The second stanza offers the psychoanalytic version of the poet's life: "I

read an article on a friend, / as if recognizing my obituary" (13-14). Lowell's comment on Berryman's mother might be his unconscious identification with this portrait: "Though his mother loved her son consumingly, / she lacked a really affectionate nature" (15-16). After presenting the striking parallels between Berryman's life and his own, Lowell denies the identification by the distancing phrase "not mine." His doubtful feelings are scattered through the stanza to demonstrate the haphazardness of causes he describes. When Merrill Moore tells him that he was unwanted, his reaction is an evasive one: "I shook him off the scent by pretending / anyone is unwanted in a medical sense--- / lust our only father ... and yet" (52-54). Two different conflicting voices reveal the unpleasant truth which cannot be reduced to a simple statement. Lowell, on the one hand, shows his personal struggle with the fact of being unwanted: "Mother I must not blame you." He tries to understand his mother's position. While she was pregnant, his father was on sea duty and she wanted to commit suicide. His mother's life is described as being like that of the deserted Penelope in "Ulysses and Circe." But the detached voice regards her actions as "unforgivable." Lowell cannot represent his parents in a complete reconciliation. As his continued revisions of poems about his parents attest, he can never completely recover lost love for them. In "Unwanted," nevertheless, we also see his mother's struggle with her troubled love for her son and her wish to die. Lowell ends the poem with a series of

questions which cast doubt on the possibility of any complete and certain interpretation. Finally, he formulates an important question about life and art: "Is getting well ever an art, / or art a way to get well?" (116-17). The poem seems to conclude that by phrasing his urgent questions through his memories and art he may move toward some kind of tentative forgiveness and reconciliation.

In *Day by Day*, Lowell seems to take his personal experiences and make a last attempt to see the significance of his memories of the past. This volume shows the creativity of memory in converting the diverse experiences of life into art. The poet creates from remembered experience rather than transcribing facts. Instead of being "paralyzed by fact," as "Epilogue" suggests, Lowell tries to breathe the life of memory into his figures. Lowell's fusion of imagination with the memory recovers a way of knowing the self and others. The image of the 'living name' described in "Epilogue" is the result of an imaginative identification of memory. Lowell returns to his conflicts with his parents and sees their personalities as humans in light of his own. He achieves the revision of the images of his parents he presented in his earlier poems.

## Conclusion

At a public reading of the poem "Epilogue," Lowell once talked of the troubled distinction between memory and imagination: "I'm not sure of that distinction. But obviously a poem has to be more than just memory. Yet memory we're told is the mother of the muses---and memory is genius, really ... but you have to do something with it" (*Robert Lowell: A Reading*). This seems to indicate Lowell's lifelong interest in transforming memories into art. In his autobiographical works, he tried to write through problems that were deeply rooted in past experience. In doing so he seems to have plotted his life freely as he fictionalized his self. Although he professed himself uncertain about his half-fiction, half-fact presentation, Lowell always pursued his imaginative art beyond a merely factual report.

By analyzing the act of remembering as a poetic strategy, I have tried to explicate the poetic process in his autobiographical works. The most important feature of his poetic project of memory is the process as an imaginative reconstruction by which memory involves more than fact. In the first chapter, I review recent models of memory that question the Augustinian concept of permanent memory. As recent theories regard memory as the reconstructive process, Lowell seems to consider fiction an essential factor in organizing the truth

of his life. Despite his remark about the permanence of memory in the earlier part of *91 Revere Street*, he does not stick to the idea of a perfect memory in the course of the memoir.

Memory is essential to the creation of the self in that the construction of the past justifies the self's attitude to past events. As Bartlett and Schacter state, memory involves the self's present awareness of the past. In *91 Revere Street*, Lowell recollects the incidents and things that seem to be essential to the formation of his self. In *Life Studies*, he also explores his lost self by remembering his personal past. As in *91 Revere Street*, he situates his self-examination in the context of American culture. He recollects his personal past in such a way to transform it into American cultural memory. In "Memories of West Street and Lepke," Lowell's private memory is presented as part of the broad American cultural situation. In "Waking in the Blue," Lowell regards himself as one of the mental cases. As in recent models of the constitution of the subject, Lowell's self is culturally constituted and dominated. Lowell seems to discard the essentialist idea of self and instead adopts the idea of a self recreated through remembering.

Finally, memory serves to know others better along with his own self. Admitting the limitation of memory in "Jean Stafford, a Letter," Lowell acknowledges that Stafford's art has its own value. Moreover, he achieves new images of his parents that reflect his new attitude. In the poems about his parents,



he presents the imaginative process of combining fact and fiction. He exposes his troubled feelings toward his parents and confronts painful memories honestly. He does not completely resolve his conflict with his parents. Nevertheless, he comes to acknowledge his parents as humans who are crucial in the reconstitution of himself.

For Lowell, memory is a formative force of the poet's artistic imagination continuously reconstructed in the present. Memories of the past are reordered by the poetic imagination to give a new perspective on life. Remembering is a creative impulse which can enable Lowell to see himself and others in a more fruitful way for the future. It endows the past with an immediacy as vivid as the present. It constitutes the poetic process by which Lowell is able to embody what he sees as the truth of his life. It seems to me that the examination of Lowell's use of memory is an effective way to understand the poetic process in his autobiographical works.

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## Vita

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